

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-03 INR-10 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-07 PA-04 RSC-01 PRS-01 SPC-03 SS-20

USIA-15 OMB-01 TRSE-00 EB-11 DRC-01 /113 W

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R 141904Z MAR 74

FM AMEMBASSY LONDON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8733

INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

AMEMBASSY DUBLIN

AMEMBASSY LUXEMBOURG

AMEMBASSY PARIS

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, UK

SUBJECT: FIRST CHALLENGE TO WILSON GOVERNMENT

BEGIN SUMMARY: HALFWAY THROUGH WHAT HAS SO FAR BEEN A
RESTRAINED COMMONS' DEBATE ON THE RELATIVELY MODERATE
LABOR PROGRAM OUTLINED IN THE QUEEN'S SPEECH, THE
CONSERVATIVE PARTY LEADERSHIP HAS DECIDED TO TABLE AN
AMENDMENT DEPLORING THE ABSENCE FROM THAT PROGRAM OF A
STATUTORY INCOMES POLICY. THE AMENDMENT WILL BE PUT TO
A VOTE ON MONDAY AND THE LIBERALS ARE EXPECTED TO SUPPORT
IT. THE CONSERVATIVE/LIBERAL DECISION TO CHALLENGE THE
WILSON GOVERNMENT COULD THEORETICALLY LEAD TO ANOTHER
GENERAL ELECTION BUT WE DOUBT IT WILL DO SO IN PRESENT

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CIRCUMSTANCES. END SUMMARY.

1. DURING THE FIRST DAYS OF THE COMMONS' DEBATE, ALL PARTIES HAVE TENDED TO TAKE RATHER CAUTIOUS, MODERATE POSITIONS. IT IS WIDELY ASSUMED THAT NONE OF THE PARTIES WOULD GENUINELY WELCOME AN EARLY GENERAL ELECTION, IN PART BECAUSE THERE IS NO GOOD REASON TO BELIEVE THE OUTCOME WOULD DIFFER SIGNIFICANTLY FROM THAT OF FEBRUARY 28TH. THE CONSERVATIVES, IN PARTICULAR, HAVE NOT YET DIGESTED THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE FEBRUARY 28 ELECTION FOR THEIR POLICIES, AND THE THOUGHT OF GOING TO THE COUNTRY AGAIN IS UNSETTLING TO MANY TORY MP'S.

2. BECAUSE NEITHER THE QUEEN'S SPEECH NOR THE ELABORATIONS OF LABOR POLICIES BY NEW GOVERNMENT MINISTERS IN COMMONS HAVE GIVEN THE OPPOSITION MUCH TO SHOOT AT, IT HAD BEEN THOUGHT THE CONSERVATIVES WOULD RESERVE THEIR POSITION UNTIL THE NEW LABOR BUDGET--EXPECTED ON MARCH 26--REVEALED MORE CLEARLY THE TRUE NATURE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S PROGRAM. THE TORIES ARE CONSCIOUS THAT IN CHALLENGING THE LABOR GOVERNMENT THEY MUST NOT APPEAR TO THE ELECTORATE TO BE UNCONSTRUCTIVE OR CHOOSE AN ISSUE WHICH IS MORE FAVORABLE TO LABOR THAN THEMSELVES. IT NOW LOOKS AS IF THEY HAVE DECIDED TO POSE THEIR FIRST CHALLENGE ON THE ISSUE OF STATUTORY INCOMES POLICY, AN AREA WHERE THE LIBERAL PARTY'S VIEWS ARE ROUGHLY AKIN TO THEIR OWN.

3. IT IS KNOWN THAT THE DECISION CAUSED A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF HEARTBURN AMONG THE PARTY LEADERSHIP. ACCORDING TO SOME PRESS STORIES, IT MAY HAVE BEEN TAKEN ONLY AS A RESULT OF STRONG BACKBENCH PRESSURE TO SHOW THE CONSERVATIVE FLAG.

4. THE LIBERALS HAVE ANNOUNCED THEY WILL VOTE FOR THE TORY AMENDMENT ON MARCH 18. IF THE TORY/LIBERAL VOTE IS ENOUGH TO CARRY, IT WOULD SEEM THAT PM WILSON HAS A NUMBER OF OPTIONS:

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- L) HE COULD CHOOSE TO IGNORE IT AND LET THE OPPOSITION CALL FOR A VOTE OF NO CONFIDENCE IF THEY WANT TO,
- 2) HE COULD CALL A SUBSEQUENT VOTE OF CONFIDENCE ON HIS OWN. IF HE WON, AS SEEMS QUITE POSSIBLE, THIS WOULD EFFECTIVELY NEGATE THE UNFAVORABLE VOTE ON THE QUEEN'S SPEECH,
- 3) HE COULD RECOMMEND TO THE QUEEN THE DISSOLUTION OF PARLIAMENT AND ANOTHER GENERAL ELECTION, OR
- 4) HE COULD RECOMMEND THAT THE QUEEN INVITE OTHER PARTY LEADERS TO TRY TO FORM A GOVERNMENT.

5. SOME OF THESE OPTIONS RAISE CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTIONS
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WHICH WE ARE UNABLE TO JUDGE. OPTIONS 3 AND 4 EITHER OFFER POWER TO THE OPPOSITION OR RISK DOING SO. ON BALANCE, WE THINK THE FIRST OPTION WOULD OFFER THE NEW LABOR GOVERNMENT THE GREATEST ADVANTAGE WITH THE LEAST RISK. ALTHOUGH THE OPPOSITION PARTIES WILL HAVE SCORED POINTS AND GIVEN THE GOVERNMENT A DISAGREEABLE REMINDER OF ITS MINORITY POSITION, THE FACTS OF THE SITUATION , WHICH LED TO A LABOR GOVERNMENT IN THE FIRST PLACE STILL OBTAIN AND THE OPPOSITION PARTIES MAY HESITATE TO INSIST ON A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE WHEN THEY ARE IN NO POSITION TO

FORM AN ALTERNATIVE GOVERNMENT. ON THE OTHER HAND, SUCH
A DEVELOPMENT COULD WELL INDUCE LIBERAL PARTY OPPONENTS
OF A TORY/LIBERAL COALITION TO THINK THAT POSSIBILITY
OVER AGAIN.

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